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AUTHOR Butin, Dan
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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the student commons area in terms of its use as a social space for student or instructional space, and covers the common design principles that all commons areas should have. Included are brief comments on educational trends that have fostered the growth of commons areas. Highlighted design principles that should be included in all common areas present areas that convey a sense of place and belonging for students, balance the pragmatic maintenance/organizational concerns of the administration with the psycho social needs of students, and make the student commons a true learning environment. (GR)

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Student Commons

National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities

Dan Butin
Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design
University of Virginia
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Student commons are no longer simply congregation spaces for students with time on their hands. They are integral to providing a welcoming environment and effective learning space for students.

Traditionally, student commons have been perceived as an inefficient use of space, a detriment to clear circulation patterns, and an unnecessary expenditure in capital outlay and long-term operational costs. This perspective, though, has begun to change. Many student commons have been transformed into spaces for socialization, an environment for alternative teaching methods, a forum for large group meetings and distance learning, and an area for consultation or individual and small group work.

Educational Trends

The academic and social well being of a middle school student is enhanced, argues the National Middle School Association, when the learning environment provides spaces where children can learn in different ways, at different speeds, and where they feel safe and valued (NMSA 1998). *Breaking Ranks*, a study by the Carnegie Foundation and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, recommends that "high schools create small units in which anonymity is banished" (Carnegie Foundation and NASSP 1995: 23).

Personalizing learning environments at all levels of the educational system has generated immense interest in classroom clusters, house plans, and school-within-a-school settings. This, in turn, has magnified the role student commons can play in a school's overall design, serving as a hub for an academic wing or providing a space for alternative teaching strategies.

Likewise, including a student commons in an architectural plan is a signal that a school is designed with student needs and wants in mind. "Our school facilities," argues noted researcher Gary Moore, "are a tangible symbol of our commitment to education, and the message is not lost on students" (Moore 1995: 4; quoted in Duke 1998: 17). Research shows, for example, that a child's sense of identity and belonging are influenced positively by appropriately scaled and comfortable furnishings, lively colors, and a "homey" feel. Students have a much greater "pride of place" in such an environment and believe they are listened to and valued as individuals (David and Weinstein 1987: 7–9).

Student Commons as Social Space

The student commons that serves a social purpose may be thought of as the student "social center," similar to the role a lobby plays in a hotel. Student commons have traditionally served as social spaces in high school settings (McCurdy 1969: 215). Today, the idea of including a student commons as a social space is becoming a regular fixture throughout all grade levels.

The student commons usually serves the entire student body (during lunchtime and between classes, for example) or is used as a study hall. It may also be used for group/club meetings, include a reading area, or function as a snack bar/vending station. The student commons should be close to food services and restrooms and be easily supervised by school administrators and personnel. Placing the student commons next to other public areas—such as the auditorium, cafeteria, or gymnasium—allows the space to be used as an overflow area during large school or community events.

To promote a social atmosphere, the design and furnishing of the student commons should be inviting and comfortable. The placement and size of couches, tables, and chairs should facilitate informal conversation, reading, and individual, one-on-one, or small group interaction. Combining indirect and task lighting provides proper light for reading. Natural light promotes a sense of space and relaxation and a raised ceiling heightens the sense of "place." Carpeting and acoustical ceilings lessen excessive noise.

In designing a student commons to serve as a social space, avoid an empty, antiseptic design. Large spaces

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ward off issues of traffic congestion, litter, and excessive wear and tear but smaller, more intimate and interesting spaces make students feel comfortable and convey a sense of institutional concern for students' needs.

Student Commons as Instructional Space

Student commons that serve as instructional spaces have become prevalent in elementary and middle schools with classroom clusters. Such clustering—sometimes known as houses or pods—may be arranged by grade, by department (such as math or science wings), or as a school-within-a-school setting. Incorporating commons areas into instructional space has been facilitated by the fact that classroom clusters are no more expensive to build than traditional layouts (*American School Board Journal* 1998: 8).

A student commons used for instructional purposes should be bordered by classrooms and have direct access to the outdoors to allow for emergency egress, provide access to the outdoor environment for educational purposes, and facilitate circulation patterns. Spaces connected to the student commons may include an instruction space for small groups, restrooms, storage, and teacher workspace. Student commons can be used as a meeting space for small groups, a meeting/lecture hall for all the students in the cluster, an area for individual work, and a breakout space for one-on-one consultations.

The commons space should be able to hold all of the students in the cluster. Allow 1,500 to 2,000 square feet for a cluster of 100 students. In designing the student commons as an instructional space, consider providing:

- numerous modular tables and chairs that can be easily moved and assembled,
- electrical outlets for computers and audiovisual equipment,
- data drop outlets for voice/video/data capability, and
- a combination of indirect and task lighting that will allow for reading and computer usage (this is particularly relevant at the high school level).

Carpeting, greenery (with appropriate lighting), water fountains, and natural light can personalize the student commons, making it "student friendly." Remember, however, that the student commons is an alternative instructional area. The space should accommodate multiple computers with modems, a rear or front projection system, a sound system, and variable lighting controls. Finally, it may be appropriate to design a three-sided, two- or three-tiered, raised amphitheater-style area. A student commons with such an amphitheater could be used for viewing videos and holding lectures for the entire student cluster, for large group discussions and orientations, and for individual reading and small group meetings.

Principles for Designing Student Commons

Student commons, be they social or instructional spaces, have numerous features in common. Their design should

- **convey a sense of place and belonging for students.** Students can feel a sense of ownership by being involved in the planning and design of the student commons or by personalizing the space. Because students will be the primary users and beneficiaries of the commons, their input can provide a unique and important perspective (Sanoff 1996: 21–22). The student commons can be personalized by featuring group color codes or school colors, displaying student artwork, and providing colorful wall decorations or thematic bulletin boards. Architectural motifs, such as skylights, raised ceilings, or distinctive patterns, also enhance student ownership.
- **balance the pragmatic maintenance/organizational concerns of the administration with the psychosocial needs of students.** The design of a space is all too often focused on avoiding negative events—for example, preventing injuries or traffic bottlenecks. The design challenge can be reframed, however: How can the furnishings in the student commons be both comfortable and durable? How can the student commons promote impromptu groupings and discussions and yet facilitate smooth traffic flow? How can the student commons provide private space and be easily supervised? Resolving these tensions is key to designing a functional and inviting student commons.
- **make the student commons a true learning environment.** For an instructional space, lighting, acoustics, and technology should support individual, small group and large group work. For a social center, the space should suggest a comfortable, inviting atmosphere and provide areas for intimate and informal discussion.

Student commons can function both as formal and informal learning environments. They provide a space for instruction and individual work and serve as places for intimate and social gatherings. Far from inefficient, student commons are central to clustered classroom designs. Providing a relaxed space that supports instruction is a prominent way to facilitate learning and enhance students' appreciation of their physical environment.

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Additional Information

See the NCEF annotated bibliography *Student Commons*, online at *http://www.edfacilities.org/ir/hottopics.cfm*.

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